



By AMITA KANEKAR


Beauty is not the Issue

An important victory was achieved by the Goan people against their own government a couple of days ago, when the villages of St. Andre and St. Cruz were removed from the controversial Greater Panjim Planning and Development Authority (PDA), thus forestalling the intensive real estate development that the latter entails. This victory comes on the back of a few other significant wins against the perverse development being foisted on us, with the courts stopping both mining and the moving of mined ore, the Pollution Control Board halting operations at Mormugao Port for lack of environmental clearance, and, of course, the Bombay High Court's judgement last year, against Parrikar's shifting of Goa's National Green Tribunal bench to Delhi, in which Justices G S Patel and N D Sardesai waxed eloquent on Goa's beauty – 'ridiculously brilliant sunsets' et al – and called it a land worth fighting for.

But is this what the fight is about – Goa's beauty? Is that why Goans have become 'anti-development' as Union Minister Nitin Gadkari put it? What Gadkari means by development is of course short-term but gigantic profits for a few investors (and their friends in government), equally short-term crumbs of jobs for a few others, and long-term devastation for all locals, human and non-human. And this is a vision shared by both Goa's top parties, with the Congress apparently set to choose Digambar Kamat – former deputy CM for the BJP, and under investigation in both the mining scam and a bribery case – as its leader, for the express reason of his good relations with Vijai Sardesai, presently Town and Country Planning (TCP) minister. The Congress hopes, so we hear, that Kamat will persuade Sardesai to topple the BJP and support a Congress government instead.

In other words, they dream of re-allying with Sardesai who, in one of the worst-ever betrayals of the Goan voter, propped up the defeated BJP that he himself had campaigned against in the last polls. What is however more relevant for the future is Sardesai's strong ties with the current development model, especially real estate development led by big builders. What will the Congress give Sardesai in return for his support? At the very least, the TCP ministry again—of this we can be sure. So where does that leave the Goan people, if not in the lurch?

For, much of the anti-government anger across Goa today is directed at Sardesai, first for the

 PDAs which will allow high-rise building in villages, and now for reviving Regional Plan 2021, the same plan that was called off following protests over the enlarged settlement zones Beauty is not the Issue planned in many villages, swallowing forestland, orchards, and fields for the purpose, and promising massive destruction of the eco-system. Settlement zones were increased, says Abhijit Prabhudesai of Rainbow Warriors, despite the fact that currently more than one lakh of Goa's 5-lakh-strong housing stock lie vacant. So who is the increased settlement for? Obviously for the benefit of the builders, tourism businesses, and buyers of second homes in Goa.

But, amidst the anger at all this, the issue of Goa's beauty has come up again, as being under threat. The judges' lyrical words are being recalled in the media and social media. Other similar statements have been dug up too, like B B (Bakibab) Borkar's old paen to Goa's 'scenic beauty' and how it was this beautiful landscape that created the Goan people.

Borkar was wrong, though. It was not the landscape which created the people, but the opposite. For Goa's landscape is not a natural one. In fact, the natural landscape of Goa is commonplace all along the western coast of the subcontinent. But Goa's extant landscape is human-made, be it the paddy fields with their sluice gates, the bunds lined with coconut palms, the creeks, the orchards on the hillsides, or the fruit-laden cashew trees. It was created by the people here, from the indigenous tribal peoples who probably built the first khazans, to the Portuguese half-millennium – which saw a huge number of new crops and farming techniques, the iconic Ponte de Linhares and other bridges, many new creeks and canals, and the architecture and urban landscape that are uniquely Goan – not to forget the 'bhaile' labourers who migrate here even today to develop the emerald-green paddy fields.

In other words, this is a landscape created historically by the local communities and their culture, an indigenous culture enriched over the centuries by much cosmopolitanism, and, while that culture might have flaws that have not been addressed, it is also a culture that remains alive, thanks to those for whom it is home.

It is important to remember this, because 'scenic beauty' is precisely all that counts for our rulers today, and their friends in the tourism and real estate industries. For it is something

they can sell, especially to rich Indians whose native environment is concrete jungle or deprived villages. It was the British writer Graham Greene who pointed out long ago how dramatically the environment and building quality declined almost as soon as one entered Maharashtra from Goa.

And this celebration of Goa's 'beauty' which does not recognise its creators is even more convenient, for it allows the two to be divorced, so that common people can be pushed off their land and out of their villages, their old houses replaced by faux-Goan villas, restaurants or boutiques – even gated apartment towers, if Sardesai's PDAs go through – their small village lanes widened for the benefit of the SUVs of the connoisseurs of 'beauty'. As someone at the Serendipity arts festival was overheard saying, Goa would be lovely if it wasn't for the Goans.

That's what development policies such as Sardesai's will achieve: a Goa without Goans. So, let's get one thing clear right now: the fight is not for any loveliness without context or history. It is for the development of Goa's communities and culture, which requires all locals to have a say and a stake in the future.

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